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ABSTRACT

In Sundanese, a western Austronesian language, speech levels allow the speaker to establish social identity through talk alone, using multiple linguistic forms with very different pragmatic meanings. These words are deference and demeanor indexicals, as in the French formal versus informal second person. It is argued that although they do exist, these speech levels establish social identities that are inherently ambiguous. In Sundanese, who or what one is talking about, not who or what someone is talking to, determines usage. A lack of fluency of usage by native speakers is found to be due to large scale cultural processes and details of the registers themselves, even though the honorific registers are found in everyday conversation. The ideology of the registers, rather than their actual usage, appears to be the most important point to consider for acceptable usage. (NAV)

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The "speech levels" of Sundanese: disfluency and identity

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The "speech levels" of Sundanese: disfluency and identity
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Michael A. Locher
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Sundanese, the Western Austronesian language of the indigenous ethnic group of West Java, Indonesia, exhibits a phenomenon that has come to be called, in the literature, "speech levels." This means that for some semantic concepts, Sundanese has multiple linguistic forms, and these forms, critically, have very different pragmatic meanings. These sets of linguistic forms allow speakers to establish their social identities through talk alone, although I will argue that the social identities thereby established are inherently ambiguous.

The words in such sets of alternates are deference and demeanor indexicals, as are the French *tu* and *vous*. The English "to eat" has three important Sundanese alternates: *tuang*, used to or of somebody to whom the speaker wants to defer (a *lemes*--refined--word); *teda*, used of oneself and those who can be identified with oneself (like one's children) when speaking to somebody to whom one wishes to defer (a *sedeng*--moderate--word); and *dahar*, used to or of somebody whose social identity one does not take into account (a *kasar*--rough--word). The rather literal glosses I have provided for the Sundanese metapragmatic terms may be somewhat misleading: *sedeng* words are no less refined than *lemes* words, but are instead forms that one uses of oneself, never of a high-status other.

In practice, for most such lexical sets, the most important factor in determining which alternate to use is who or what one is talking about, not who or what one is talking to, making this an honorific register somewhat different than those found in the neighboring languages (including, most famously, Javanese). I must emphasize that, as in all such systems, the creative aspect of indexical usage is of paramount importance: the status relations of interlocutors are often shaped by the event of speaking itself, and are only rarely prior to the event.

I became interested in the registers because of their obvious importance to Sundanese speakers, coupled with their equally obvious lack of ability to use the registers fluently. The reasons for this lack of fluency have to do with both large-scale cultural processes and details of the registers themselves, which I will briefly discuss.

The history of the language is very important for understanding natives' lack of fluency in using the lexical registers. The development of honorific registers in Sundanese is a relatively recent phenomenon. Sometime after 1600, and thus after the last major Sundanese highland kingdom had been destroyed, these lexical registers began to develop. This was likely due to the influence of the Javanese language from the east, for which the development of lexical registers is somewhat better understood. The registers were most important among the Sundanese elite (the aristocracy), but because there was no major traditionally-functioning court center, this elite was much more dispersed than

in Central Java, and knowledge of the registers may have remained low as a consequence. In addition, the absence of courts doubtless stymied the production of Sundanese literary works that could have helped disseminate knowledge of the registers.

There have also been modern attacks on the registers: both Indonesian revolutionaries, who saw in the registers a relic of Java's "feudal" colonial past, and modernist Muslims, who opposed the registers on religious-cum-social grounds, have been influential in limiting popular knowledge of the registers, particularly along the north coast of Java.

Nonetheless, for modern speakers of Sundanese, the existence of these lexical registers is the single most important fact about their language. Whenever I mentioned that I was studying Sundanese, somebody would tell me how difficult Sundanese was because of these registers, and usually illustrate with an example, often "to eat." Sundanese, I was told, "has lots of words," enabling people to be more polite when they speak. This ability to be polite, for most Sundanese, far outweighs any religious or social scruples about using the registers.

In spite of the importance of the registers to natives' ideas about their language, I was repeatedly struck by how disfluent people actually were in their use. As often as not, the person illustrating the use of the registers would mix up the words, at least according to the handful of books concerning the registers that I obtained. Or, at different times, an informant would give me very different inventories and metapragmatic accounts of the members of the lexical sets, even the most commonly-used sets. Even my books were chock-full of inconsistencies, both judging from the rules of usage that they advanced, and by cross-checking with other books and local school teachers who taught Sundanese. The confusion particularly surrounded the "higher" registers, *sedeng* and *lemes*, which are used relatively infrequently in everyday discourse. Ironically, it is precisely these registers of the language that are considered to be "real" Sundanese, as opposed to the everyday "market language." Informants repeatedly bemoaned the inability of most speakers to use these registers properly. The first-order system of deference indexicality has become a sign itself, and has been swept up by ideological currents and refunctionalized to index "Good Speakerhood," a second-order indexical system. The general disfluency in the usage of the registers contributed to the feeling that those who did use them well were more refined. The intersection of these two orders of indexicality tends to pull speakers in different directions, as I will discuss in more detail below.

The honorific registers pervade everyday conversation. Although most words in the language carry no deferential pragmatic load, it is difficult to utter a sentence in Sundanese using only these neutral terms. Most commonly-used verbs and nouns (including especially those denoting human physical attributes and psychological states), as well as some prepositions and connectives are enregistered. Most sentences comprise several words of a particular register interspersed with neutral words.

In the broadest terms, Sundanese has *lemes* and *kasar* language (see 1 in the handout). The former comprises those registers

labelled indigenously as *lemes pisan*, *lemes*, *sedeng*, and *panengah*, while the latter comprises *kasar* and *kasar pisan*. Since *lemes pisan* (very refined) and *panengah* (middling) are very small registers (having perhaps half a dozen distinct members each), I will not discuss them in this paper. I will also skip over *kasar pisan* (very rough), which is the register of anger and insult, used otherwise mostly of animals.

Lemes and *sedeng* words are status-raising, in two senses: they honor the referent and/or addressee of a speaker, and also mark the speaker as a being worthy of respect. This double effect is due to the first-order system of deference indexicality being also a second-order system that indexes the inherent quality of the speaker. Based on the first-order system alone, speaking *lemes* shows deference, and implies the speaker's interactional inferiority. The second-order system, however, allows the speaker to assert his/her superiority by showing off refinement. By speaking *lemes*, one demands *lemes*.

Kasar words are status-lowering, or better, status-nullifying words. One speaks *kasar* to an interlocutor and/or of a referent to interactionally ignore that person's status. Not only does the speaker of *kasar* rob the other (whether addressee or referent) of social identity, the speaker shows a personal lack of refinement by not putting the addressee's or referent's feelings before the speaker's own words. It is for this reason that speaking *kasar* is so devalued: were it merely speaking "down," there would be little reason not to try to get away with it all the time in the ongoing interactional status game.

In fact, there are more effective ways to speak "down" than by using solely *kasar* lexemes. To do so requires flaunting the rules of register usage, however. Ideally, a speaker should construct sentences so that registers are not mixed: a sentence in *sedeng* must use all available *sedeng* alternates, with the rest of the sentence fleshed out by neutral (non-enregistered) words. It often happens, however, that speakers will inadvertently mix registers. It is also possible purposely to speak "down" to somebody else by addressing that person with a single *lemes* vocative, then speaking the rest of the sentence in *kasar*. This instantly grants the addressee social standing, then undermines it.

The most difficult aspect of the lexical registers, for speakers of Sundanese, is uncertainty about which words have *lemes* alternates, and which are unenregistered. Many words have synonyms that do not belong to the honorific registers.

A second difficulty is keeping the registers straight. Although the speakers understand the denotational content of enregistered words, they don't necessarily know their first-order pragmatic value. The sets of alternates are of three major types: for each of the three major registers, there may be three different lexemes (as in the case of "to eat") or there may be only two (see Section 2a of the handout). If there are two, the *sedeng* lexeme may be the same as the *kasar* lexeme, or it may be the same as the *lemes* lexeme. This leads to considerable confusion for speakers trying to refer to and predicate of themselves, and contributes to their disfluency.

Another problem for speakers is that some Sundanese roots can

belong to multiple registers (see Section 2b of the handout). There exist roots that are *lemes* with one set of affixes, *sedeng* with another, *kasar* with a third, and neutral with others. There are also phrases that are enregistered, although the constituent members of those phrases are considered neutral.

Further confusing the picture is *basa budak*, child language, which is a register used by young children, and by parents speaking to young children (see Section 2c of the handout). Most of the words in this register are simply phonetically simpler forms of other Sundanese words, including enregistered deference indexicals. In the area where I lived, child language was often used in place of *lemes* words even by adults speaking together. For these speakers, the fact that children use these words to their parents (never mind that the parents use them to their children), marks them as refined forms. That several of the commoner forms are phonetically related to *lemes* alternates bolsters this impression.

A final problem for speakers of Sundanese is that the lexical sets continuously change. Terms that were considered *lemes* fifty years ago are now considered *kasar*. In many cases the now-moribund *lemes pisan* register furnished words for those wishing to show their urbanity by speaking as finely as they could. As these words became generally used, their value decreased, and everything in the lexical set was devalued as a result: what had been *lemes pisan* became merely *lemes*, and what had been *lemes* became *kasar*. This problem occasionally surfaces with older speakers, who learned very different values for their lexical sets. It also happens that Arabic words will be adopted into the honorific registers, and they usually enter as *lemes* words, pushing all other words in the set into other registers.

Standard Sundanese, the most highly valued form of the language, entails usage of the lexical registers, yet almost all speakers show a radical uncertainty before it. The "lots of words" that Sundanese has present problems for its speakers. At the local junior high school, Sundanese was considered to be the most difficult subject, and students' grades bore out this feeling. Sundanese often assume that learning the registers requires something for which no amount of study can compensate: learning English was a matter of rote memorization, but learning Sundanese was thought to take spiritual refinement.

I was often told, in all seriousness, that if I really wanted to study Sundanese, I should go to the Netherlands, because the Dutch can speak the language much better than the Sundanese themselves. This is a rather extreme example of a universal feeling among Sundanese with whom I spoke: the best Sundanese was always spoken someplace else. If I inquired of the villagers where I stayed where the best Sundanese was spoken, they would point to the cities of Bandung and Cianjur. When I met people from those cities, however, and asked where the best Sundanese was spoken, they would usually point to villages in the West Javanese highlands. Nobody ever claimed that his or her home was a place where good Sundanese was spoken.

My friends frequently bragged to visitors (other Sundanese) that here I was, a foreigner, really learning their language, while they remained ignorant. They would then coax a few sentences in

Sundanese out of me, to the obvious delight of the visitors. Whatever I produced, even utterances in *kasar* Sundanese, was always identified as *lemes* Sundanese. Because I was seen as an authority on the speech registers, I was taken to be a much more reliable arbiter of usage than the native speakers: few would challenge me. This in spite of the fact that I still have only a rather sketchy working knowledge of the morphology of the language, and many of my acquaintances knew this. It was more impressive that I could produce the *lemes* verbal root than that I couldn't figure out how to put it in passive voice. (There are four possible ways, depending on the verb.)

Furthermore, I made a choice at the beginning of my stay that I was going to use *lemes* Sundanese, to the best of my ability, to everyone with whom I spoke. This, of course, resulted in some howlingly funny situations. Here I was, a white male researcher from an American university (all tending to make me high status) speaking *lemes* Sundanese to five-year-olds who were incapable of speaking to me in anything except *kasar* language. In one sense, I was committing a pragmatic boner of gargantuan proportions, yet nobody ever corrected me. On the contrary, this sort of behavior indexed my inner refinement, and, ironically, made me high status in Sundanese eyes. Some people joked that I was unable to pronounce the *kasar* alternates, because I was too refined. (Simply reading the first-order indexicality of the forms, of course, would indicate that I was deferring to a high-status child.)

The Sundanese system of lexical registers thus provides speakers with two ways to establish their social identity. Ironically, these two ways, based on two orders of indexicality, are at odds. Where the first-order system indexes deference only to those spoken to or about, the second-order system reflects only on the speaker. And by speaking *lemes*, one effectively asserts both interactional inferiority and superiority.

As a final note, I want to point out that Sundanese illustrates the importance of ideology in the constitution of systems of second-order indexicality. The mere assumption that there is *lemes* language is enough to drive the system, while knowledge of the actual register remains incomplete. (And as I mentioned above, it is not just the most obscure members of the set of *lemes* lexemes that are unknown.)

Uncertainty about the registers often is enough to cause Sundanese to use Indonesian for public speaking, which requires *lemes* Sundanese, no matter to whom one speaks. However, when someone does speak Sundanese in public (and such people are usually--significantly--people of importance), whatever is said is taken to be *lemes* Sundanese.

Clearly, the ideology of the registers, rather than their actual usage, is the most important point to consider. In spite of the fact that speakers do not necessarily know the *lemes* registers, since nobody else does either, many words not recognized as *kasar* are assumed to be *lemes* words used correctly. If the semantic meaning fits, but the pragmatic meaning is ambiguous, the speaker is usually given the benefit of the doubt. The system thus functions smoothly.

The "speech levels" of Sundanese: disfluency and identity

Michael A. Locher

1. The lexical registers of deference indexicals

Lemes language:
- *lemes pisan*--"very refined"
- *lemes* (l)--"refined," register used to or of someone to whom one wishes to defer
- *sedeng* (s)--"moderate," register used of oneself when speaking to someone to whom one wishes to defer
- *panengah*--"middling"

Kasar language:
- *kasar* (k)--"rough," register used to or of someone whose social identity one does not take into account
- *kasar pisan*--"very rough"

2. Difficulties of the lexical registers

a) Examples of lexical sets of different kinds

	kasar	*sedeng*	*lemes*
to eat	*dahar*	*teda*	*tuang*
to sleep	*saré*	*pondok*	*kulem*
house	*imah*	*rorompok*	*bumi*
there is not	*euweuh*	*teu aya*	*teu aya*
already	*enggeus*	*parantos*	*parantos*
knowledge	*pangaweruh*	*kauninga*	*kauninga*
to lose	*éléh*	*éléh*	*kawon*
old	*kolot*	*kolot*	*sepuh*
child	*anak*	*anak*	*putra*

b) Single roots in multiple registers (common roots underlined)

udur:	sick	*gering* (k), <u>*udur*</u> (s), *teu damang* (l)
	hindrance	<u>*paudur*</u> (k), *pambengan* (l)
	sickly	<u>*uduran*</u> (neutral)
saré:	to sleep	<u>*saré*</u> (k), *pondok* (s), *kulem* (l)
	bed	<u>*pasaréan*</u> (k), *pangkuleman* (l)
	grave	*kuburan* (k), <u>*pasaréan*</u> (s), *pajaratan* (l)
	to be buried	*dikubur* (k), <u>*sumaré*</u> (l)
	to fall asleep unexpectedly	<u>*kasaréan*</u> (neutral)
pariksa:	to inspect	<u>*mariksa*</u> (k), <u>*mariksa*</u> (s), *marios* (l)
	to question	*nanya* (k), *naros* (s), <u>*mariksa*</u> (l)
	question	<u>*pamariksa*</u> (neutral)

c) Child language (b) (underlined word yields simplified form)

To drink: *nginum* (k), *nginum* (s), *ngaleueut* (l) yield *eueut* (b)
To return home: *balik* (k), *wangsul* (s), *mulih* (l) yield *uih* (b)
To ask: *ménta* (k), *nyuhunkeun* (s), *mundut* (l) yield *ukeun* (b)
Rice cracker: *kurupuk* (neutral) yields *pupuk* (b)
To eat: *dahar* (k), *teda* (s), *tuang* (l) yield *emam* (b)

3. Sample sentences

Kasar: *Kuring/Maneh/Manéhna enggeus boga tilu anak.*
I/You/She-He already have three children.
I/You/He-She have/has three children.

Sedeng: *Abdi parantos gaduh tilu anak.*
I already have three children.
I have three children.

Lemes: *Bapa (éta) parantos kagungan tilu putra.*
You/(That [man]) already have three children.
You/(That man) have/has three children.

4. First-order vs. second-order indexicality

The first-order indexicality of the system is its deference indexicality. The usage of a particular form defers or not, and thus locates the speaker with respect to addressees and/or referents.

The second-order indexicality of the system depends upon the first-order system being taken as a sign itself. The same words have thus been refunctionalized to index the inherent quality of the speaker, based on the ideology that speaking well requires using the registers fluently. For that reason using the *lemes* registers is a sign of personal refinement. This came to be because of the sociolectal distribution of knowledge of the registers: it tended to be the elite who spoke them most fluently. Thus those who speak *lemes* partake of the qualities of the elite.

The two orders of indexicality pull in different directions: the first-order system claims that speaking *lemes* determines one's social identity as being beneath that of the interlocutor and/or addressee, while the second-order system allows the speaking of *lemes* to be an assertion of interactional superiority.